

VZCZCXRO8159  
PP RUEHCI  
DE RUEHKA #0999/01 2661039  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 221039Z SEP 08  
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7423  
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 8609  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2339  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9853  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0825  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1452

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000999

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB, SCA/FO, DRL KBERGLUND

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: NATIONAL ELECTIONS SET FOR 18 DECEMBER; WILL BE HELD BEFORE  
LOCAL ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed announced September 20 that parliamentary elections would take place December 18 and Upazila, or sub-district (county equivalent), elections would be held later in the month. The Chief Adviser also declared that the State of Emergency would be relaxed to allow for increased campaigning. In general, political parties have reacted favorably to the announcement, but still have many concerns, most notably regarding the State of Emergency. By agreeing to hold the national elections first, the Caretaker Government (CTG) has indicated its willingness to compromise with the parties. Now the onus is on the political parties and their leaders to reciprocate.

ELECTION DATES DECEMBER 18, 24, 28

2. (U) In a televised address to the nation in the evening of September 20, the Chief Adviser announced that parliamentary elections would be held December 18 and that Upazila elections would be held in two tranches, on December 24 and 28. Notably, the Caretaker Government made the announcement, not the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC), which unfortunately served to sideline and marginalize the Commission's role in the upcoming elections. In his address the Chief Adviser said that both leaders of the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) have agreed to participate in the upcoming national polls. The Chief Adviser suggested the State of Emergency would not be lifted entirely until after elections, though he said it would be relaxed to allow political parties to campaign.

PARTIES, BUSINESS, GOVERNMENT REACT POSITIVELY

3. (U) The two major political parties hailed the Chief Adviser's announcement of the date of national elections. Awami League leaders welcomed the statement and called on all political parties to participate. They noted that the remaining electoral issues can be worked out through a consultative process with the BEC. BNP leaders also welcomed the announcement of the date of national elections, but were more critical in their comments, particularly with regard to lifting the State of Emergency and Upazila elections. The BNP remains uncommitted to participating in Upazila elections. The Caretaker Government recognized the importance of announcing a definitive date for the parliamentary elections and noted that holding Upazila elections after national elections would help ensure participation by all major political parties in the upcoming polls. Business leaders also welcomed the speech as it eliminates uncertainty regarding the return of a democratically elected government, which should encourage greater economic stability.

CONCERNS OVER LIFTING STATE OF EMERGENCY, UPAZILA ELECTIONS

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¶3. (U) The political parties continue to call on the Caretaker Government to fully lift the State of Emergency in order to create an atmosphere that will allow for free, fair, and credible elections. Awami League Acting General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam noted that elections under a State of Emergency would not be acceptable, especially by the international community. (Note: The Diplomatic Corps and Capitals have not been presenting a unified position on the need to fully retract the State of Emergency. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Prior to the Chief Adviser's announcement, all political parties had vehemently opposed holding Upazila elections before national elections. While the Caretaker Government has now compromised on this point, the parties have complained that the dates of the national and Upazila elections are scheduled too close together. There are both questions of the BEC's capacity to manage multiple elections schedules as well as political concerns about parallel elections campaigns. Some argue that if Upazila elections are not held by January 1, they will need to be further delayed to allow time for the yearly update of electoral rolls required to register new eligible voters. This adds to the Government's sense of urgency to hold Upazila polls partly on December 24 and partly on December 28 to avoid having these non-partisan elections for sub-national government posts become wholly politicized. Clearly most political parties would like to delay the Upazila elections further in order to ensure that their own local party officials can be elected and to have greater influence over that electoral process.

COMMENT

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¶5. (SBU) The announcement establishing election dates is a positive step for Bangladesh. There will likely be further discussions between the parties and the Caretaker Government regarding the State of Emergency and Upazila elections. Thus far, the Caretaker Government has made several key concessions to the political parties. It is now up to the parties to show they are prepared to behave differently from previous elections, which were marred by corruption and violence.

Moriarty